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ABSTRACT

The National Curriculum, introduced under the Education Reform Act of 1988, has influenced the cultural politics of secondary schools in England and Wales. The National Curriculum began a new phase in the role of teachers developing school curriculum that is characterized by centralized control and external accountability. To many it suggests a crisis in teacher's professionalism. This paper considers the degree of departure in policy and practice represented by the National Curriculum and suggests commonalities that underlie the surface appearance of change. The paper also describes the curriculum policies prior to the National Curriculum from the 1950s to the 1970s and how curriculum has been affected by change. Accounts by secondary school teachers reveal the extent of their autonomy within the classroom as presented in the Dearing Review of 1994. Teachers do generally find a degree of latitude that appears to reflect a note of optimism and self-reliance in spite of wider bureaucratic constraints. One view of the National Curriculum describes, in positive terms, the decrease in potential abuses in pre-National Curriculum years known as the "secret garden." The paper also mentions the changes in public support for teacher autonomy of curriculum in the classroom. (Contains 42 references.) (RIB)

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THE NATIONAL CURRICULUM AND THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN ENGLAND AND WALES

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THE NATIONAL CURRICULUM AND THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN ENGLAND AND WALES

Gary McCulloch

The cultural politics of secondary schools in England and Wales have been deeply influenced by the National Curriculum introduced under the Education Reform Act of 1988. What was once regarded as the 'secret garden of the curriculum' (Hansard 1960), a phrase that symbolised the freedom accorded to school teachers to control what they taught and how they taught it, has now become more formalised and public in its structures and mechanisms. Lawton anticipated (1980a, 1980b) the 'end of the secret garden'. By the late 1980s, Lawn could dismiss the idea of teacher autonomy in curriculum control as 'historically specific to the period 1925-80' (Lawn 1987, p. 227; see also e.g. Chitty and Lawn 1995). The National Curriculum appears to mark a new phase in the role of teachers in the school curriculum that is characterised by centralised control and external accountability. In broader terms, it suggests a crisis in the 'professionalism' of teachers that is akin to the erosion of the social authority of other occupational groups, and part of what has been seen as a general decline of 'professional society' (see Perkin 1989, 1996 on professional society and elites, Hoyle and John 1995 on teachers as professionals).

The present paper reflects on the extent of the departure in educational policy and practice represented by the National Curriculum, and suggests some significant continuities that underlie the surface appearance of change. In particular, while detailed historical research reveals major limitations and constraints to teachers' supposed freedom even in the 'Golden Age of teacher control (or non-control) of the curriculum' (Lawton 1980a, p. 22), interviews with secondary school teachers in the 1990s reflect continuing scope for negotiation of the curriculum even within the confines of the National Curriculum. The cultural politics of secondary schools have undergone interesting and subtle shifts in this process. Other recent research has begun to explore teachers' ability to negotiate or accommodate the new challenges posed by the National Curriculum (e.g. Bowe and Ball 1992 esp. Ch. 4, Woods and Wenham 1995, Helsby and McCulloch 1996, Helsby and McCulloch 1997). It is important to relate these contemporary struggles to longer-term issues involving the role of teachers in the school curriculum (see also e.g. Lawton 1996), especially in relation to what might be described as the politics of professionalism, that is, debates over the scope and limits of teachers' freedom for action in this sphere.

Critics of the National Curriculum were especially concerned that it would destroy the relative autonomy of teachers in the classroom domain which had been central to their 'professionalism' (see Helsby and McCulloch 1996, McCulloch 1997a). It was this prospect that was emphasised for example by Professor Helen Simons, who warned (1988, p. 80):

> ...the national curriculum will take the place of local professional judgement of common provision, testing and schemes of work will confine pedagogy to what is conducive to publicly comparable performance, and the responsibility for curriculum experimentation, development, growth and

> change - the hallmark of professionalism - will no longer be the concern of teachers, schools or localities. They are destined to become the implementers of curricula, judged nevertheless by the success of treatments they no longer devise.

These fears were heightened in the early 1990s as the implementation of the National Curriculum proved to be highly bureaucratic and intrusive in its effects. It was noted that teachers' 'professional knowledge' was 'at risk of becoming undermined by a heavily prescriptive, bureaucratic and managerial view of the curriculum, with an over emphasis on predetermined attainment targets and rigid forms of testing and assessment' (Ackland 1992, p. 88).

There was evidence, moreover, that teachers themselves were conscious of losing their former role in this area. It was observed in 1993 that 'The two points on which the overwhelming majority of teachers agree are that the introduction of the curriculum has placed a heavy burden on their time, and that their professional concerns have been casually disdained.' (The Independent 1993). According to one secondary school history teacher, interviewed by Robert Phillips (1991, p. 22),

> My main objection to the concept of a National Curriculum is that it negates my professionalism and integrity as a teacher and a historian. The history course I have devised in my school works for me, my department and my pupils. It is one I can justify in breadth, scope, detail and balance. I am being asked to dismantle a syllabus I have faith and experience in, for one that is artificial, contrived and lacks integrity. Whereas I have always welcomed debate, suggestions and guidelines, I resent bitterly now having to teach someone else's package.... I am a qualified history teacher with ten years' teaching experience and as such feel more than capable of making my own decisions regarding the curriculum.

Phillips concludes: 'The State's new regulatory requirements have forced the history teacher to re-examine his/her role as autonomous curricular decision-maker.' (1991, p. 22). Similar concerns were also observed among primary school teachers (e.g. Pollard et al 1994).

The 'secret garden' revisited

Just as the National Curriculum is seen to mark a major watershed in curriculum policy, so the period before its introduction is remembered as a very different age. Teachers' freedom and autonomy in the curriculum domain, associated with the 1960s and 1970s, are recalled sometimes with fondness and nostalgia and sometimes much less kindly, but usually as something that has been either lost or discarded. Even critical observers of the fast changing educational scene have tended to acknowledge the force of the arguments that ushered in the National Curriculum. The former Chief Inspector Eric Bolton, for example, notes that '...there was no doubt that our curriculum was stupidly varied and those big HMI reports of 1989 on secondary and primary education maths revealed that there was just so much variation in what an individual youngster might meet, or the resources they'd get or whatever, that it was

just indefensible. Therefore we clearly needed more curriculum law.' (Bolton 1996). Duncan Graham, former chair of the National Curriculum Council, could recall the 'extreme' views of his father, a headteacher, who 'believed nobody should go into a teacher's classroom because they were the king there and that everything they said went. And he believed that professionalism therefore implied...the curriculum was entirely at the discretion of the teacher and that judgement about the classroom practice was entirely for the individual professor.' (Graham 1996). Such testimony evokes an age of innocence and freedom, antediluvian in its attractive but doomed assumptions.

School teachers have also in large part incorporated this notion of life before the National Curriculum into what Ben-Peretz (1995) describes as their 'professional memories'. Myth and memory have indeed interacted to construct a powerful impression of transformation from a position in which the freedom of teachers was virtually unlimited, to one in which they have little or no scope to assert their own authority.

Detailed investigation of the role of teachers in the curriculum domain between the 1950s and the 1970s begins to question the idea that they enjoyed an idyllic freedom during this period. In spite of official approval for teacher control, and a general reluctance on the part of the State to become actively involved in curriculum matters, practical constraints and everyday limitations always served to undermine teachers' freedom of action. This meant that the exercise of their supposed autonomy was problematic and involved negotiation at both macro and micro levels.

In the 1950s and 1960s, attention was concentrated on the teacher as 'a professional who must be directly implicated in the business of curriculum renewal; not as a mere purveyor of other people's bright ideas, but as an innovator himself' (Schools Council 1968, p. 10). Sir Alec Clegg, chief education officer for West Riding, was for example a prominent advocate of the teacher as 'a professional making his own diagnoses and prescribing his own treatments', as opposed to being 'a low-grade technician working under someone else's instructions' (Schools Council 1968, p. 25). Some civil servants and politicians were impatient with what Lord Hailsham, Minister for Science in the early 1960s, described (1961) as 'the traditional view held here that the content of curriculum and text books should not be a matter for the Ministry [of Education]', but the orthodoxy remained that there was no feasible alternative to 'the patient working out of syllabuses by teachers' (Weaver 1961). As was emphasised by one leading official at the Ministry of Education in relation to the school science curriculum (Weaver 1961), 'In our system there is no centre of power where differences can be resolved. In practice each science teacher bases his syllabus on a mixture of his own experience, the known views of the professional associations and of H.M. Inspectorate, and the examination syllabus chosen by the school.' This general outlook depended on the assumption that where change was necessary, each school could 'work out its own scheme, depending on its own strengths and circumstances' (Porter 1965).

Largely concealed by this view, however, was an emerging recognition that teachers' freedom was in practice being constrained and increasingly undermined by external influences on the schools. In the early 1960s, this awareness led to negotiaions to

develop a new partnership between teachers and the State that would be based on a newly created body, the Schools Council for the Curriculum and Examinations (see also Dean 1997). On behalf of the main teachers' union, the National Union of Teachers, it was acknowledged (Powell-Davies 1963) that 'schools are becoming increasingly the objects of external pressures which are none the less real because they act indirectly through such means as external examinations, the entry requirements of higher education institutions and the professions, and the new technological environment in which the schools have to function'. Indeed, it was added, 'we agree that in such a sociological context there is real danger that the concepts of the autonomy of the school and the freedom of the teacher could become increasingly meaningless'. The Minister of Education, Sir Robert Boyle, also stressed (1963) that it had 'long been public policy in England and Wales to regard the schools curriculum and teaching methods as exclusively the concern of the teachers', and that 'In theory, the teachers are free to decide for themselves what they want to teach, and how they want to teach it.' Even so, he noted,

> In practice, the teacher's freedom in curricular matters has been increasingly curtailed by public examinations, and by other external influences on the curriculum. Only the nursery and infants' schools escape these pressures. At all other stages of the educational process, public examinations, the entry requirements of professional bodies, selection tests for entry to the grammar schools, and other influences besides, shape curriculum, teaching methods and school organisation in degrees varying from almost complete domination to a strong indirect influence.

It is important to recognise, therefore, that although teachers operated amid high expectations of control and autonomy in the classroom, they were also subject to strong and increasing external influences that undermined and often negated the freedom that they were supposed to enjoy. The practical and everyday constraints that resulted are evident from some empirical studies of teachers' classroom management published in the 1960s and 1970s. For example, Philip Taylor, himself a leading supporter of teachers' control and autonomy, found in his discussions with teachers in secondary schools, in the three subject areas of English, science and geography, a wide range of ambitions and expectations: 'One discussion began with the confident assertion that you began planning a course by determining its aims; another with the very tentative comment: "Much depends on the qualifications and interests of the teachers", and yet a third with the statement: "We are, of course, creatures of our environment and not free to choose. There are such things as examinations and syllabuses."' (Taylor 1970, p.9). In these discussions, it was the practical constraints on teachers' planning of courses that appeared to be uppermost in many cases, rather than the freedom and autonomy of the received ideal.

A later example of similar research, published in the 1980s (Calderhead 1984) commented on how the curriculum innovations of the 1960s and 1970s had generally developed outside the schools, but had often not been successfully implemented in the classroom, or else had not operated there as had been originally intended. At the same time, it emphasised the practical limitations that tended to impinge on the teacher in terms of managing the curriculum:

> Decisions about what ought to be taught and how are value judgements which are made by people and agencies both within and beyond the school, and such decisions obviously influence how teachers plan and teach. The recommendations of HMIs, the curriculum guidelines of LEAs, externally set examinations and policy decisions within the school may all contribute to the syllabus that a teacher is expected to follow and the materials that are made available (pp. 82-3).

The views of colleagues, parents and others would also have a major influence over the practices of teachers. The strongly held views of one secondary school mathematics teacher, for example, 'obviously did not persuade his head of department, headteacher or for that matter some of the parents, all of whom possessed quite different, more traditional conceptions of schoolwork', and the overall result was that 'Together they made it quite clear that he would rapidly have to change his ideas.' (p. 83).

Such evidence suggests that teacher control and autonomy in the curriculum domain were much less strong, and a great deal more limited, in the period before the introduction of the National Curriculum than is generally recalled or assumed. It is clearly true that there existed strong public expectations for teachers to assume a dominant role in this area, but the underlying reality was less straightforward. There remains scope for further research to inquire in greater detail into the micropolitics of the school curriculum during these years, to develop what might be described as a natural history of the 'secret garden'. For present purposes, however, it is sufficient to emphasise that the reality did not correspond with the myth that was sustained at the time and that has been so resonant in the 1990s.

Teachers and the National Curriculum

As has been seen, the widespread impression that the National Curriculum represented a major change in the position of teachers has often been shared among teachers themselves. It is noticeable, however, that many teachers are able to find considerable scope for manoeuvre within the framework of the National Curriculum, and that they often retain important continuities in the nature of their teaching in spite of the policy changes of the past decade. A renegotiation of teachers' 'professionalism' has taken place in the process, conditioning some established features but retaining others. The chief inspector for schools, Chris Woodhead, has recently observed for example that 'I do not see teachers as mere technicians, or teaching as some kind of painting-by-numbers activity', but adds that whereas teacher professionalism in England and Wales has traditionally been identified with controlling the school curriculum, the focus should instead be on classroom practice, or pedagogy. Thus, on the one hand, 'We are not trying to define the way teachers should teach, it is not a toolkit approach'. On the other, however, 'We need to move to a more outcome-based model of professionalism - to devolve as much as possible, and then hold people accountable.' (TES 1998). In what kinds of ways have these changes and continuities been reflected in the negotiations that take place in secondary schools and classrooms?

The accounts of secondary school teachers are often revealing on the extent of their freedom and autonomy within the classroom, especially in relation to how they teach

but also in many cases with respect to content such as in the choice of topics. For some teachers, indeed, the National Curriculum seems to have made little or no difference to the nature of their teaching. In other cases, although the National Curriculum as it was originally introduced represented a major challenge to their freedom and autonomy, they have been able to reassert themselves as they become more accustomed and experienced, and often more confident, within the new framework. This process has in many cases been further encouraged by the outcomes of the Dearing Review which recommended that the requirements of the National Curriculum should be 'slimmed down' in order to allow teachers greater 'scope for professional judgement' (Dearing 1994, p. 20). Teachers were interviewed to discern their views following the implementation of this Review.

Several interesting examples may be drawn on here to illustrate these features of the scope of teachers within the framework of the National Curriculum after the Dearing Review of 1994. One geography teacher, for instance, has a strong notion of the radical change represented by the National Curriculum, and shows no understanding of what the idea of 'teacher freedom in the curriculum' might entail: 'Is it a term that's bandied about? Or have you just made, is it one that you've made up?' (teacher 216). At the same time, he notes that the National Curriculum has made little difference to his own teaching: 'My views of what makes a good lesson have matured..., so the way I teach will certainly have changed over fifteen years but only through my own development. I can't say that National Curriculum has actually altered the way I teach.' (teacher 216). Moreover, he also indicates several areas of scope for manoeuvre so far as the content of the geography curriculum is concerned. The 'constraints' are clear,

> In that there are certain topics that have to be done like, for instance, earthquakes. I know I've got to do earthquakes. If I had a complete hatred of doing earthquakes it wouldn't matter, I'd still have to do it. So there are those sort of topics that have got to be covered. There's freedom in things like, a developing country has got to be studied and you've got flexibility to choose the developing country. But a developing country must be done, so there's the constraint, although there's freedom within that.

On the other hand, in this case at least the National Curriculum did not entail a major change in content:

> Certain bits were the same. I've actually saved all the schemes of work, lower school syllabuses that I've had like for the past twenty years and I can easily look back. But for instance, just before coming down here I was teaching a piece of work about manufacturing industry and I know, I can picture it on a previous syllabus I did, exactly the same thing. Exactly the same thing.

Overall, although the National Curriculum had 'widened the type of topics I've done and widened the scale', this geography teacher describes himself as 'happy with what the National Curriculum asks me to teach' (teacher 216; see also Roberts 1995, 1997, on geography teachers and the National Curriculum).

In the case of a recently appointed history teacher, there is a similar sense of major change from the situation that prevailed before the National Curriculum, but again some significant indications of scope for manoeuvre in spite of the prescribed limitations of the curriculum framework. He points out that 'in a lot of it you haven't a lot of choice of what goes in, it's prescribed in the National Curriculum', although she had herself 're jigged and re vamped' some of the schemes of work at her school 'to try to make them more interesting' (teacher 207). On the other hand, he also notes that 'within limited areas, within assessment and within content we can make some decisions'. In particular, '...there are times when the National Curriculum is not that precisely worded, it's vague. It might say pupils need to study and then give a list and you don't necessarily need to cover them all, so we are making decisions in that sort of area, oh we won't do that, it's not as good as this say.' This scope for freedom was especially important in relation to teaching methods, as he continues:

> You still have to teach, you still have to teach the lessons every day, it's still your job, that you were trained for and despite the fact that they're telling you what you've got to do, they can't make you do it in a certain way. You still make the ultimate decision that I'm going to present this through a work sheet or I'm going to talk about it or I'm going to dress up as a whatever, or I'm going to show them a video about it or whatever. Or I'm going to do it through drama, you know, you still make the decision at, you know sort of the front line level but this is how I'm going to do it. They've told me I've got to teach to the Reformation but they haven't said that I can't dress up as, I mean I haven't, but they can't tell me how I've got to do it as it were. You know, if I want to pretend that I'm Martin Luther, then I will be (teacher 207).

In other cases, the Dearing Review has helped to strengthen this scope for manoeuvre, as in the instance of one geography teacher who reflects that following this review, 'I'm more comfortable in the sense that...there seems to be less content.... And there seems to be a greater chance of us, shall I say for instance, of using our own materials again. Sort of we're in if you like, more control. Particularly say for instance in the initial stages in year seven and eight.' (teacher 219).

Such indications of scope for manoeuvre and of an underlying continuity in teachers' practices are especially strong in the case of secondary school mathematics teachers (see also Saunders and Warburton 1997 on the specific case of mathematics teachers in the National Curriculum). For one recently appointed maths teacher, there appears to be 'nothing new in it'. Her scope for manoeuvre is still 'not so much what to teach but how to teach it', although, as she continues,

> ...within the classroom I'm the one that makes the decisions. I know what I've to teach but in any job you know what you have to do and then it's normally down to the individual then, as long as you get to the end result they don't really mind how you get there so long as it's a reasonable method but there are normally three or four ways of doing anything. All different but none of them necessarily wrong (teacher 226).

A more experienced maths teacher places even more emphasis on the importance of 'teaching strategies'

> The ways in which I teach my subject. We still have our own little ivory tower within our classroom and my classroom has got my personality, whatever that may be, written all over it and the way that I teach has got my personality written all over it. So although we do work within certain limitations because of the scheme of work and the topics and we also have recommended books and recommended activities that all staff must er, not necessarily do but must consider. At the end of the day what I find works with me is what I will do (teacher 209).

So far as this teacher is concerned, the Dearing Review is again an encouragement to 'professionalism' in so far as it is not 'prescriptive' and 'it gives you a direction rather than a straight jacket'. Thus, he notes,

> We are not as straight jacketed as we were. There are certain parts of the country where the children will benefit from being taught certain aspects... which is totally different to what children up in the North East might find relevant. So to be able to free it up, to free up part of the curriculum so that schools individually can decide what to put in, is good. And also you have teachers who've got a wealth of experience within certain, not necessarily expert curricular areas but curricular areas that were not necessarily within, allowed within the old National Curriculum and those teachers can now plan courses.

There is a note of optimism and self-reliance in such testimony that hints strongly at a renewed sense of freedom and autonomy in spite of wider constraints.

This is again the case with another experienced mathematics teacher, a Head of Department who has witnessed the changing scene of the past thirty years. To this teacher, mathematics is unique in that its content is 'a body of knowledge that is relatively unchanging, certainly as far as a secondary school curriculum is concerned' (teacher 095). For this reason, 'Parents may not recognise the way Maths is taught today, but essentially Mathematics is the same .... I don't teach it the way I did 20 years ago but what I teach hasn't changed very much.' With this experience and with the control of an 'unchanging' body of knowledge now encouraged further by the Dearing Review, this teacher has the confidence to assert that 'I'm an experienced teacher, perhaps too old to change too much, I don't know, and I find that I can carry on perhaps more in the way that I did, and maybe some people expect me to get away with it.' (teacher 095).

In such cases, although the dominant discourse of the National Curriculum is one of accountability and uniformity, the teachers involved are finding at least some scope to manoeuvre if only though their position within the classroom and their general teaching experience. The amount of teaching experience seems to be an important factor in this in providing a resource to reassert 'professionalism' (see also Helsby 1995 on teachers' ideas of professionalism in the 1990s), and different subject cultures also seem to provide different kinds of opportunity to do so (see also Siskin and Little 1995 on

'subject cultures' in general). While these teachers are highly conscious of the constraints imposed by the curriculum framework, their descriptions of their practices suggest an element of continuity underlying the radical change usually associated with the National Curriculum that involves the retention of at least an element of freedom and autonomy in the curriculum domain.

The cultural politics of the National Curriculum

It appears, then, that just as teachers before the National Curriculum enjoyed less scope for freedom in the curriculum field than popular legend would convey, teachers have often been able to cultivate greater scope for such freedom than is generally assumed within the framework of the National Curriculum itself. It is important to recognise the continuity that underlies the National Curriculum no less than the surface appearance of change. The cultural politics of secondary schools have been strongly influenced as a result.

There is an important discrepancy between the change usually emphasised by commentators and teachers and the continuity suggested in the experience of many teachers. The accounts of some teachers vividly reflect this contradiction as they both distance themselves from the 'secret garden' before the National Curriculum and assert their continuing 'professional' role. There seem to be several reasons for this discrepancy. In some cases, teachers are critical in a general way of the alleged abuses of the freedom and autonomy supposedly enjoyed in the 1960s and 1970s, but exclude themselves as individuals from this criticism. That is, they suggest that teachers' freedom went too far during this period but that there is still a valid role for it. This, indeed, is the position held by the mathematics head of department (teacher 095), who notes: 'I fully accept that in the English education system perhaps there's been far too much scope. People have been able to do what they want, operate whichever syllabuses they wanted and there's not been the core requirements.' The same teacher is concerned that the balance has gone too far in favour of accountability and external control, but is encouraged by the Dearing Review, 'so perhaps we recognise that we've had too much freedom, but I don't think we want to give up the professional judgemental situation that we find ourselves in' (teacher 095). On this view the National Curriculum constitutes a reining in of abuses in the freedom enjoyed under the previous regime, a reining in that might indeed be too strong a reaction but within which individual teachers can continue to develop their 'professional judgemental' skills.

At a deeper level, change is generally emphasised because of an exaggerated notion of the freedoms that were supposed to exist for teachers in the era of the 'secret garden'. This high level of freedom and autonomy was to a large extent a myth cultivated on behalf of teachers, and did not correspond fully with the reality (see also McCulloch 1997a). Even so, the myth seems to have left a lasting impression of a 'Golden Age' that contrasts sharply with the dilemmas of the 1990s. That is to say, this view of the past helps to shape and articulate a particular kind of understanding of the present (see McCulloch 1997b on links between historical perspectives and education policies in the 1990s). Untangling the myth from the reality is difficult especially because of the elusive nature of teacher control of the curriculum, the subtle ways in which it can be negotiated, and the relative privacy of the domain of the classroom in which it takes

place. This process itself seems to be integral to an understanding of the cultural politics of secondary schools. There seems, however, to be some considerable distance to be traversed between the overheated 'professional memories' of virtually unlimited freedom in an earlier era, and the practical constraints and socio-political realities of the 1960s and 1970s.

There is, even so, at least one important change that must not escape attention when comparing the 1960s and the 1990s. Then, the active role of teachers in the curriculum domain was endorsed and commended in public by politicians and pressure groups. Now, such public support has greatly diminished, and teachers' freedom and autonomy have come to be at best tolerated as an optional extra and often despised as a dangerous distraction. Ironically therefore the 'secret garden' has retreated from public view into the inner recesses of the classroom domain as a result of the National Curriculum, as teachers are left to their discretion within often stringent limits, and in fear of discovery and redress.

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